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## MR. LINCOLN'S SERMON.

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EVILS OF SECTARIANISM.

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A

## SERMON,

PREACHED AT

FITCHBURG, SUNDAY, APRIL 9, 1843.

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BY CALVIN LINCOLN,

MINISTER OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY IN FITCHBURG.

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## S E R M O N.

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MARK, IX. 38, 39.

And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us; and we forbade him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me.

THE religion with which we are blessed, originated in the mercy of God, and the spirit which it breathes, bears witness to its divine origin. The life of Jesus was in perfect accordance with the precepts that he inculcated. Mildness marked his manner. His admonitions to those around him,—even to the depraved,—were ever tempered with mercy. Every act of his life, every sentiment which he expressed, is suited to produce the conviction, that he appeared on earth as the messenger of truth and love; that he came to advance the spiritual and eternal welfare of the erring and the lost; and that he commended true goodness, and rejoiced in its existence, in whatever connections it was presented to his notice. His views were too enlarged and generous to allow his sympathies and expressions of approval to be confined to a single class in society,—to the people of a single district or nation. He came to be the teacher of our race. To the penitent, of every outward condition, he gave assurance of pardon and divine assistance.

The early friends of our Lord were slow to understand the great principles inculcated by their Master, and to imbibe his benevolent spirit. Their opinions of the divine character were far less exalted, and in some particulars were in striking contrast with those which our Saviour labored to diffuse. They were educated in the midst of a people, distinguished for their attachment to the institutions of their national religion; a people who, in cherishing a just abhorrence of Paganism, had come to regard with feelings which all true religion condemns, all who did not bow at the same altar with themselves. The temper of mind which had thus become familiar, they retained for a season after becoming personally interested in the character and teachings of our Saviour. They had not yet learned to contemplate religion as a system of true holiness, which may appear under different circumstances, and in different connections. But as they had formerly believed that all true goodness was associated with the services in the temple at Jerusalem, so now they evinced a deep interest in the extension of their Master's influence; and they appear to have thought that his kingdom was advanced in proportion, precisely, as the number of their immediate associates was increased. Thus it does not seem to have been the cause of their Master, the cause of truth and holiness alone, which awakened their zeal; but while interested in the purposes of his ministry, they blended with that interest feelings unworthy the high service to which they had been called.

This state of mind is illustrated by the incident recorded in my text. We saw one, said an apostle to Jesus, casting out devils, and we forbade him, because he followeth not us. The reason assigned for this course, manifests the spirit by which they were actuated. No objection

was made to the character of the work performed;—for such an objection there could be no place. It was peculiarly a work of mercy. Relief was afforded to a human being suffering from one of the severest calamities with which humanity was ever visited. Nor could the apostles complain of the manner in which this miracle of love had been performed. Their language was, we saw one casting out devils in *thy name*. There was no evidence of disrespect for the name and authority of Jesus, to call forth the prohibition which they uttered. Their own statement, however, points to the influence under which they acted,—“we forbade him, because he followeth not us.” The benevolence of his work was undeniable, and it was attended with a public recognition of the divine authority of their Master. Yet the disciples could not behold, in this individual, a brother, a fellow-laborer in the great cause of human happiness and human virtue. They looked on him with suspicion, and would not allow him to bear the name of a disciple, because he followed not them. Our Saviour rebuked the spirit thus manifested by his zealous but unenlightened friends. He says to them, no man can do a miracle, or any good work, in my name, and be unfriendly to my cause, “For he that is not against us, is on our part. For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.”

From the preceding account, we clearly perceive what was the spirit of our divine Master, and we see how early, an unworthy,—a party spirit affected the minds of his followers. Owing to a variety of causes,—especially to the imperfection of the human understanding,—diversity of opinion has existed among the avowed friends of our holy

religion; and often, indeed, have those receiving opposite formulas of faith, arrayed themselves in hostile parties, cherishing towards each other the most unkind feelings,—forgetting the great object of Christianity, in their zeal to sustain the peculiar form in which they have received this religion. To establish the truth of this statement, I need not direct your attention to the history of past ages, and recount the violent contentions and cruel persecutions, which have brought reproach on the professed followers of the Prince of peace. It is enough to say, that this spirit still prevails. Its influences are widely extended, and its pernicious consequences are deeply felt. No one who is conversant with the writings or practices of opposing sects, can fail to be convinced, that the unhallowed spirit of party animosity is still exerting a baneful influence on the Christian world. In this remark, I would not be understood to say,—for I do not believe it true,—that this evil exists exclusively with any one class of Christians; nor can I urge in favor of any single denomination, entire exemption from its injurious effects. This malevolent spirit manifests itself towards opposers, sometimes in refusing to allow them the name of Christians,—sometimes in excluding them from the ordinances of the gospel,—sometimes in expressions of contempt for their understandings; and yet again, in ridiculing their peculiar services, and in charging them with deception and hypocrisy. These different methods of manifesting opposition to those who do not receive our own opinions, all originate, as I think, in the same spirit, and are equally inconsistent with the teachings of our holy religion.

Mournful have been the fruits of division among avowed Christians.<sup>b</sup> Instead of forbearing one another, too often we have been forward to reproach, and condemn our

fellow-disciples. I would not be understood to say, that I think it a matter of indifference what are our speculative opinions, nor would I convey the idea that we should not become strongly interested in that system of doctrines which, to our minds, is sustained by divine authority; nor, again, should it be thought that I would discourage Christian efforts for the diffusion of what we regard as Christian truth. In one class of doctrines, claiming to be a statement of Christian truth, to my own mind there is a peculiar power. For I firmly believe that those doctrines give us the most correct and exalted conceptions of the divine character,—of the nature, the obligations, and the destiny of man,—and are, therefore, adapted to affect the conscience, to control the will, and to produce a fervent and enlightened piety. Such I regard as their legitimate results. If these results are not produced, the failure must be ascribed not to the intrinsic character of the doctrines, but to their imperfect influence on the heart and the life. Truth has power which belongs to itself alone. It is worth the most diligent toil in its discovery. It is a treasure to the soul, for which all should, faithfully strive. And I can hardly imagine that any intelligent individual, who has contemplated the subject of religion, with that absorbing interest which its infinite value demands, should still regard with equal complacency the different and opposing forms of faith, in connection with which, the great truths of Christianity are presented to his mind. I would not repress inquiry,—I would not prevent discussion. Let men inquire, and let them reason together. But investigation and argument are not to be confounded with harsh denunciations, and the struggles of partisan zeal. Inquiry and discussion arise from an earnest desire to know and obey the truth as it

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is in Jesus; while bitterness and strife are called forth by devotion to the interests of a sect, and by a determination, in which pride and passion are both enlisted, to sustain the party with which we now associate, and to persevere in defending the cause that we have once espoused. From these remarks, you will perceive the great distinction which there is between enlightened zeal, in the support and diffusion of those views which we believe to be correct, and that spirit which directs our efforts to the aggrandizement of a denomination. This latter disposition, all are in danger of imbibing; and it is my object in the remainder of this discourse, to mention some of its evils, in the hope that we may be led to guard our own minds against its approaches and its power.

1. The state of mind which I have thus described, is in direct opposition to the spirit of our religion. I have already spoken of the feelings manifested by our Saviour. He stated clearly and explicitly the great truths which he came to publish. He was ever faithful to the trust he received from the Father. He rebuked vice in all its forms, and in whatever connection it was exhibited. With uncompromising honesty, he exposed and condemned the hypocrisy of the Pharisee, and the injustice and oppression exercised by the exalted and the powerful. Yet his language was mild towards the ignorant and the prejudiced; and while he condemned, with unsparing truth, their crimes, he discovered a tender solicitude for their regeneration, improvement and happiness. Of his disciples, he required a love for others resembling his own. On the acquisition of this grace, their claim to be acknowledged as his true followers depended. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one towards another." When

Christians of opposing parties, with excited passions, lift up their voices in the language of censure and recrimination, and instead of blessing one another, are forward to accuse and condemn, is not their conduct a direct violation of the precepts of their Master? Is the spirit which lives in their bosoms, in accordance with the law of love propounded by their Heavenly teacher?

If this temper of mind is incompatible with the benevolence which Christianity enjoins, not less is it opposed to that humility which should distinguish the followers of him, who was meek and lowly in heart. What idea must be present to our minds, when on the mere ground of his departure from our own system of faith, we ascribe to another, depravity of heart, or dulness of mental vision? Most certainly that of our own superior holiness or wisdom. The apostle taught, that we should esteem others better than ourselves. And do we not violate this command, when, forgetting our own frailty, and disregarding the influences that may have affected our minds, and modified our opinions, we see, in the supposed or real errors of others, only evidence of depraved affections, or a perverted understanding? While such is the temper of our minds, we cannot truly know ourselves. While thus rash and severe in our judgment of others, we cannot fully understand the weakness of our own powers, or the errors of our own hearts. I exhort you then, my friends, as you would acquire the benevolence and humility of the gospel, to keep yourselves estranged from all violent party excitement. Ever be faithful to the truth. Assert and defend what you believe. Do this without fear, but do it with perfect kindness towards those whose opinions you cannot receive.

2. A sectarian spirit renders us unjust to the religious principles and practices of surrounding Christians. To the truth of this statement, every man of sober mind and reflecting habits, will at once assent. It is verified in almost every community, when the spirit of religious controversy is excited, and the flame of party contention enkindled. On what ground do many condemn the motives, the actions, and the principles of their fellow Christians? Is it not often assumed as a principle safe to be followed, that those of one sect, however upright their lives, are destitute of piety; and that those of another are without integrity? Their good deeds are, at times, acknowledged. Nay more, it will be admitted, that they manifest an interest in the cause of holiness. Still, in our presumption, we dare ascribe to them unworthy, selfish motives. We say many things as partisans, which, in the hour of dispassionate thought, we do not and cannot believe. For who, I ask, that takes an enlarged survey of society, does not see around him, in every sect, the workings of good and of bad passions? Who does not see that there are honest and dishonest men; men that you can trust, and men that you fear? If, then, we give utterance to sweeping censure, and say of this, or the other class, that they cannot be good men, true Christians, are we not doing them manifest injustice, by refusing to make their lives the exponents of their principles? Are we not setting at naught the rule prescribed by our Saviour?

It is easy, however, to trace this injustice to the spirit under consideration. For when the feelings are strongly excited in defending any system of doctrines, and pride and passion are called forth by their spreading influence,

or the opposition which they encounter, we unconsciously magnify the value of those doctrines. Ardently engaged in the defence of any speculative opinion, and disposed to resent the incredulity of those who refuse to embrace it, we wish to satisfy our own minds, at least, that there is abundant reason for the feelings which we cherish, and the measures that we adopt. Hence, our attention is fastened on those points in which the creed of others departs from our own, and by continually contemplating this difference, we come, gradually, to believe it to constitute the most important part of the Christian revelation,—and, at last, pronounce it essential to the very existence of true religion. Being thus prepossessed in favor of our own opinions, we find evidence of their truth, through the disordered state of our minds, in almost every passage of scripture. And since the evidence is so satisfactory to our own minds, and the doctrines in question are so very important to the true influence of Christianity, we arrive at the conclusion, that others, were they not wilfully blind, would see as we see;—were they not depraved in heart, would embrace what we believe. Viewing them as enemies of truth, because they oppose what we think to be the truth, we are led to believe, that the same wrong bias, the same moral depravity, which affects their religious speculations, must corrupt their motives and actions in all the relations of life.

In this connection, I add, that when professed Christians are engaged in accomplishing party purposes, their feelings almost invariably assume something of a personal character. They look with a jealous and unfriendly eye on all who oppose the cause in which they are enlisted. To bring reproach upon the cause of their opponents, they are willing

to injure the character of those by whom it is sustained. How much of slander, and cruel misrepresentation of language, opinions and conduct, has originated in this source! How often have individuals, of various religious parties, all professing to be disciples of him, who said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," assailed the reputation of some formidable supporter of a rival sect, endeavoring to destroy his influence, by ruining his good name! Is this Christian? Is it not that spirit, which, more than all others, Christianity unequivocally condemns? May we never suffer this unchristian spirit to gain a place in our minds. Remember, my friends, that no cause is so important as that of holiness, and that the true spirit betokens the true cause. Ever be just to the character of your religious opponents. Wherein they live as Christians, let them receive your cordial approbation and respect; and if they ever employ reproach and slander, instead of arguments drawn from the teachings of Jesus, in opposing a cause dear to your hearts, fear more to imitate their example, than to suffer from their injustice.

3. Another evil growing out of party zeal in a Christian community, appears in the false taste, and wrong expectations which it produces, in reference to the design and services of the Lord's day. The Sabbath, said our Saviour, was made for man,—for his present and eternal good; to remind him of his relations to the supreme Being, of his wants, and his obligations; to unfold to him the way of spiritual deliverance, and to aid him in the preparation of his soul for the realities of the unseen world. When Christians meet together, in the temple of the Most High, it should be, with sentiments of penitence and humility in their hearts, that they may implore divine mercy, that

they may unite in acts of adoration and praise. And what is the great object of preaching? Is it not to unfold the principles of the gospel, to illustrate their reasonableness and their value, to point out their application in the reformation of the heart and the life; and to persuade the thoughtless and impenitent to embrace and obey those great truths which come to the soul with a saving power? In one word, I believe that the great object with a Christian minister should be, the reconciliation of those who hear him to duty and to God. But this purpose is in danger of being disregarded, both by the preacher and his audience, when the spirit of party warfare has been excited in their minds. For this spirit, as I have said, creates a false taste. Under its influence, professed Christians assemble in the house of prayer, not solely with the view of becoming better, of gaining strength to subdue unhallowed passions, and to correct vicious habits. Their thoughts are turned away from themselves. They desire to hear opinions which they deem erroneous, decried, and shown to be absurd. Is it not to be feared, that this state of mind is sometimes so predominant, that we are more pleased with bold denunciation, pointed sarcasm, and ridicule, which display talent, than with a manly, earnest and eloquent defence of truth and righteousness, or a faithful exhortation to prepare for a coming judgment?

Doctrines of controversial theology are suitable subjects for discussion on the Lord's day. A people should willingly listen to such discussions, and a minister should offer for their consideration and instruction, his own views of Christian truth, and the reasons which influence his mind in their adoption. But this should be done with seriousness and candor, and always, as it seems to me, with a direct

reference to the moral influence of truth. We are to remember, that denunciation is not argument, that ridicule is not reasoning, that satirizing the opinions of others proves, not that they are wrong in theory, but that we are wrong in practice. Let us beware of bringing this strange fire with the sacrifice which we offer at the altar of our God. Let us ever remember the high purposes for which, under the providence of God, the Sabbath has been separated; and as we hope to secure the holy and happy fruits which public worship is suited to afford, let us preserve our minds free from that sectarian zeal, which will prompt us to assemble in the house of God, rather as controversialists, than as Christians. May we come together hungering and thirsting after righteousness, earnestly seeking from Heaven that forgiveness and support, which, amid the trials, the sins, and temptations of life, we so constantly need.

4. Another evil resulting from the unhallowed spirit of sectarian zeal, is manifested in its influence on the minds of a large class, who have never thoroughly investigated the authority, and the principles of Christianity, and who have no just views of the value of Christian institutions. On such minds, and at times on those of a higher order, harsh recriminations among professed disciples of Jesus, have the unhappy effect of inclining them to universal scepticism. I do not mean that these persons become avowed unbelievers, although this result occasionally follows. But many are encouraged in distrusting the value of Christian institutions, because the friends of these institutions manifest so imperfectly a Christian spirit. Is it a strange thing to meet individuals, who boldly assert, that they are uninterested in the doctrines and truths of our religion; that they feel no concern that its influence

should be extended? You inquire, how they can regard with indifference this last best gift of God, designed to impart present peace, and to bestow on them enduring riches. In answer to your inquiry, they point you to the unhallowed controversies sustained among the friends of Jesus, and ask, with an air of triumph, if such are the good fruits of strong interest in the subject of religion?

I know it is wrong to ascribe to our holy religion, evils which should be attributed solely to its imperfect influence on the hearts of its nominal friends. Still, the occasion of this calamity does not diminish its magnitude; and what greater calamity can the individual or society suffer, than to receive the impression, that it is safe and wise to disregard Christian principles, and neglect the observance of Christian institutions? What can tend more directly than this impression, to destroy private integrity, social order, and our civil institutions? How can you so effectually advance the growth of immorality, as by removing from the mind that conviction of responsibility to God, which the teachings and sanctions of Christianity alone are adequate to produce? That this evil, with all its appalling consequences, has often resulted from the cause which I have mentioned, no one conversant with society will refuse to acknowledge. Is it not, then, the duty of Christians, to pause and ponder their course, and as they love God and holiness, as they desire the salvation of their fellow-men, to abstain from those practices by which many are led to speak evil of the Christian name?

5. Again, I remark that the sectarian spirit under notice, is decidedly unfavorable to the progress of religious knowledge, and to a free and impartial examination of the sources of doctrinal truth. It hinders the progress of valuable

religious knowledge, for this reason, that it diverts attention from the practical principles, and life-giving truths of Christianity, by confining our thoughts and inquiries to points of "doubtful disputation." To many, this statement may, at the first view, appear unwarranted. It will be asked, does not controversy mark the present age? Was religious knowledge, in any former period of the church, so generally diffused? Were subjects of Christian theology ever so generally topics of discussion with all classes in society? Has there not been an unparalleled advance in theological learning? I am not disposed to undervalue the attainments which distinguish the present period of the world. I cheerfully allow, that much good has been effected. Yet I am firmly convinced, that we often unduly magnify the acquisitions of modern times, and manifest less humility than becomes us, when contrasting our own condition with that of preceding ages in the history of the church. As it respects religious knowledge,—I mean that which is really valuable, which elevates the thoughts and sanctifies the mind,—I thankfully admit, that facilities for its acquisition have been greatly increased. But, I ask, in return, would not these means of progress have been more faithfully improved, had less of a controversial spirit been awakened in the common mind? Good sometimes results from an interest in controversial theology, because, in this way, people become acquainted with those great truths, about which there is generally no controversy. But when this interest becomes absorbing, and we are devoted to the cause of a party, rather than moved by a love of truth, it exhausts the energies of the mind in fruitless speculation, leaving but little time, and often less disposition, for a faithful investigation of the great principles revealed in the word

of God. The evidences of Christianity, the manner in which the precepts of our Saviour are to be understood and applied, to the heated mind of a theological partisan, are comparatively dull and uninteresting subjects of thought; and very many, it is to be feared, do not partake of the true "bread which cometh down from heaven," because they are exclusively engaged in contending about the form and manner in which this bread should be received.

Reference has been made to the religious conversation of the day. It is true that you may hear conversation *about* religion, at all times, and in all places. But what are its characteristics? Is it so common, as some suppose, to hear individuals seriously discussing the all important truths of our religion,—those which relate to the character and will of God, the duty and the destiny of man? Is it not often a mere strife about words, that you hear? One individual relating the success of his own denomination, and the overthrow of an opposing sect, in this city, or that village? Again, you hear the champion of one party extolled, and the name of his theological antagonist loaded with reproach. Does this wrangling and disputation evince an intimate acquaintance with the spiritual truths of Christianity? Does it furnish evidence of a mind enlarged by research, strengthened by thought, and purified by communion with Heaven? I exhort you, my friends, to shun this profitless expenditure of time. You may become adroit controversialists, and still be destitute of that knowledge of God, which leadeth to eternal life. I would not dissuade you from examining disputed doctrines; I rather urge you to this course, that you may test their truth, that your own faith may rest on substantial evidence. Do not, however, remain satisfied with this kind of knowledge.

Raise your minds to a higher and holier field of contemplation; to inquiries with which none of earthly passion is mingled, and which are suited to give you deeper and truer impressions of the great purpose of life?

I have said that a sectarian spirit is unfavorable to impartial inquiry, and to the discovery of Christian truth. In illustration of this point, many of the remarks already made, are strictly applicable. Truth, like every rich blessing to the soul, is promised to those who comply with certain conditions. For the discovery of truth, the mind must be open to conviction, and willing to examine and weigh evidence. There must be a thirst for knowledge. There must be faith in the value of truth itself; and, consequently, a willingness to relinquish present opinions, and, when adequate evidence is presented to our minds, to adopt those which hitherto we have not believed. This condition of the soul is disturbed, when we become zealous partisans in defence of disputed doctrines. There is a feeling of pride, there are prejudices to be subdued, before we can renounce opinions which we have once publicly and ardently defended. If we open the New Testament, shall we be disposed to study, with impartiality, those passages, which it is most difficult to reconcile with our previous speculations? Is there not reason to believe, that professed Christians often turn to the sacred volume, that they may find support for opinions already avowed, rather than to receive additional light for the correction of their errors? Nor are these injurious effects confined to our own minds. When sectarian zeal is awakened, proselytism becomes our purpose. Intent on augmenting a party, efforts are made to sway the judgment, and change the opinions of those whom we meet in life. And influences other than

the love of truth and the weight of evidence, are brought to bear upon their decisions. I do not ask you to be indifferent concerning the progress of those doctrines which you receive as communications from Heaven; but I do entreat you by all your reverence for truth, by all your reverence for the authority of God, to employ none but Christian methods for their diffusion. You are to reason with others concerning the doctrines of the gospel. Calmly point them to the evidence which satisfies your own understanding. Thus far you may act conscientiously. But if you appeal to the lower passions of the soul, to the fear of censure, to the love of praise and popularity, then you are faithless to the truth; and though you should succeed in winning a new advocate to your cause, you are guilty of wounding his conscience, by bringing other considerations than the love of truth and the weight of evidence, to affect his decision.

In conclusion, I will direct your attention to the unhappy influence of sectarian zeal, on the intercourse of social and domestic life. I have already adverted to the inconsistency of this temper with the precepts of our divine Master. And if its existence in the soul is a violation of the law of love, its outward manifestation no less disturbs the peace and mars the happiness of society. God hath created us to be interested in each other's welfare, to sympathize in each other's trials, to be helpers of each other's joys. He hath sent his Son to proclaim peace on earth and good will to men. Could this religion go forth in its power and its spirit, how rich the blessings thus bestowed on our world! But how unlike this is the spirit often exhibited in the intercourse of man with man! How often are the turbulent passions brought into full exercise! That such

feelings should be manifested by the selfish and worldly-minded, by men who profess no allegiance to the authority of Christ, ought not to awaken our surprise. But that the same spirit should be displayed by men professing to be disciples of Jesus, and in defence of what they believe to be Christian truth, gives occasion for the deepest sorrow; and it would, indeed, excite our surprise, were it not that its frequency prevents this effect. How often does this spirit chill the kindest affections of the human heart, and cloud with severity the countenance that should beam with love! It spares no relations in its cruel assaults, it subverts the order of domestic life, and creates feelings of distrust in the bosoms of those who, above all others, should cherish towards each other the strongest confidence. I ask, is this condition of things necessary? While we know but in part, occasional errors in judgment will attend our inquiries after truth. If we differ in opinion, let it be in the spirit of humility and brotherly love. Thus the evils of controversy would cease to be felt. We should mutually co-operate in the advancement of truth, and the lives of Christians would be a powerful illustration of the value of their religion. May the time be hastened when the discordant sounds of sectarian strife shall be silenced; when the avowed disciples of our Lord shall show that they are animated by his spirit, because they exercise that Charity which is greater than Faith or Hope.



